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CONTENDER

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PRISTINA 00000492 001.2 OF 004

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED - PLEASE PROTECT ACCORDINGLY.

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), Kosovo's oldest and second largest political party appears reinvigorated going into the November 15 local elections, following its 2007 electoral flop. LDK is more united and organized than at any time in the last three years, and it is employing professional campaign tactics that many within the party believe have it poised for a comeback. LDK is also fielding younger candidates and courting younger voters in an effort to broaden its base and mobilize more voters on election day. Our visits to Suhareka, Gjilan, and Gjakova and exchanges with LDK mayoral candidates in each suggest that local party branches are indeed better organized and more energized than in previous years. LDK cannot afford another disappointing electoral showing. With elections less than a week away pundits and prognosticators now believe LDK will not only have little trouble retaining control of the municipalities it won in 2007, but could do much better. If that's the case it will have reestablished itself as a credible political force in Kosovo ahead of general elections due by 2011, and Pristina Mayor Isa Mustafa -- a rising star in the party and the face of this year's LDK campaign -- could be well placed to challenge Kosovo President Fatmir Sejdiu for the leadership of the party in 2010. END SUMMARY

MAKING UP FOR THE PREVIOUS DISASTER

¶2. (SBU) Kosovo's November 2009 municipal elections provide an opportunity for the once-dominant Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) to rebound from a disastrous showing in the 2007 elections, when the party's vote tally more than halved in comparison to 2004, dropping from 313,000 to 130,000. Subsequent survey data indicate that only a few of these LDK voters switched to other parties; most simply stayed at home on election day. (Note: Those that did switch generally moved to the New Kosovo Alliance (AKR) or to the Democratic League of Dardania (LDD). End Note) This crushing loss left LDK's grassroots demoralized and its senior leadership divided. The party drifted under President Sejdiu, who is

constitutionally-barred from managing LDK as its party leader, and no other personalities emerged to fill the power vacuum. LDK hit a low point this past winter and spring when Pristina was filled with almost daily rumors of an impending party split and of impending mass defection of LDK MPs to the opposition Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK). More recently, LDK's internal divisions have eased, and Sejdiu tapped Lutfi Haziri, the party's Kosovo Assembly caucus leader and once Sejdiu's harshest critic, to run the party's 2009 election campaign. For the first time in months, LDK leadership figures tell us that the party is on the way back, and they credit increased attention to the grass roots and a new focus on campaigning as reasons why they expect significant gains in next week's vote.

JUST LIKE A REAL PARTY

13. (SBU) In May, LDK held a party conference centered on a "values and vision" theme to discuss the party's principles and policies. (Note: USAID implementer the National Democratic Institute (NDI) assisted LDK in organizing the party conference. End note) The conference was a wonkish, policy-laden affair that drew little publicity, but it marked the first time in three years that the party's central leadership had sought feedback from branch leaders and grassroots activists. Minister of Local Government Administration Sadri Ferati, a party loyalist whom Sejdiu trusts, subsequently engaged senior LDK leaders in a first-ever nationwide party branch "listening tour" designed to reconnect the party's senior leadership with LDK's local leaders and to energize rank-and-file activists. These routine events were a novelty for a party that had become infamous for ignoring retail politics -- for example, in the 2007 elections LDK did not begin a coordinated national campaign until the final two weeks before election day.

PRISTINA 00000492 002.2 OF 004

This election season, discussions with a wide array of central and local party leaders display clear unity, optimism and growing competence as LDK heads into local elections.

FOR BETTER RESULTS: IMPROVED CAMPAIGN TECHNOLOGY...

14. (SBU) In a recent conversation, Haziri told us that LDK is pinning its electoral hopes on winning municipal races in Gjilan/Gnjilane, Prizren, Peja/Pec and Dragash/Dragas while holding onto to its current municipalities, most importantly vote-rich Pristina where incumbent Isa Mustafa is the odds on favorite for a second term. (Note: Before the 2007 elections, LDK controlled 20 of the 26 municipalities where ethnic Albanians were a majority. Following the 2007 electoral collapse LDK retained control of local assemblies and mayoral seats in just five municipalities: Pristina, Podujevo, Kosovo Polje, Istok, and Suhareka. LDK holds two additional mayoralties, in Obilic and Novo Brdo. End Note) Haziri said he expects LDK to win or place second in every municipal contest. This summer the party designated a local campaign manager for each municipality and has since identified an estimated 20,000 volunteers to support them. LDK's public relations campaign is noticeably improved since earlier in the year, and the party now speaks with a single, coordinated voice. The party is also employing improved information technology: SMS technology to coordinate campaign operations, modern polling techniques that give it current, detailed information on individual municipal races and a Facebook page designed to appeal to the country's large youth vote.

... AND AN APPEAL TO THE YOUTH

15. (SBU) LDK has gone beyond social networking sites to appeal to Kosovo's youth vote, most importantly by putting young people on the ballot. At Haziri's urging, LDK has selected over 600 young people -- mostly twenty-somethings -- as municipal council candidates, a figure that represents 30 percent of the LDK's 2,000 municipal council candidates nationwide. LDK has also actively courted younger voters, for example with a national campaign kick-off rally October 15 that entertained several thousand mostly young party supporters with well-known Kosovo singers and dancers in addition to

the campaign speeches of party leaders. LDK has replicated such "rock concert" rallies at the municipal level, efforts that stand in stark contrast to the conventional rallies of many of its opponents.

PRISTINA: VICTORY PRELUDE TO A LEADERSHIP FIGHT?

¶6. (SBU) In Pristina -- and increasingly throughout the rest of the country -- the city's incumbent mayor, Isa Mustafa, is the LDK's star attraction in the party's efforts to motivate the base. Mustafa appears poised for an easy re-election victory in the pivotal race for control of Kosovo's capital and largest city. His performances in televised debates have left his opponents looking uninformed, and he has gained national prominence for his recent public quarrel with PDK Deputy Prime Minister Hajredin Kuci regarding the coalition's stability and his comments suggesting LDK dissatisfaction with the party's subservient role to the PDK. In the process, he is, for many voters, taking on the appearance of LDK's standard-bearer. This is a new role for a relative newcomer to the party, who previously was known as a competent technocrat with an academic background. A convincing win in Pristina will feed speculation that Mustafa has growing ambitions to lead the party. If so, a planned party convention in April 2010 could turn into a face-off between Mustafa and President Sejdiu for control of LDK. Mustafa has significant support from a core of LDK activists -- urban elites resentful of being pushed aside by PDK's former KLA country bumpkins. These supporters object to the party's coalition with PDK and could back Mustafa in a leadership challenge to supplant Sejdiu -- who constitutionally cannot take a hands-on role in running the party -- as the LDK's public face and spiritual leader. With speculation among Pristina's political class focusing

PRISTINA 00000492 003.2 OF 004

on the prospects of early national elections, a strong showing by both Mustafa in Pristina and his party throughout the country could be a prelude to LDK withdrawing from government in an attempt to force snap elections and to challenge PDK for control of the government.

SUHAREKA: DEFENDING WHAT'S LEFT

¶7. (SBU) Among the municipalities LDK currently holds, the election in Suhareka/Suva Reka in central Kosovo, will be among the most fiercely contested and the most closely watched. Ramush Haradinaj's AAK is also targeting the municipality as a way to expand beyond western Kosovo. We met recently with Suhareka's incumbent LDK mayor, Sali Asllanaj, who described a large, coordinated and invigorated LDK branch organization in full campaign battle mode. Asllanaj -- confident, well-spoken and easily conversant in local issues -- told us that LDK is better organized for this year's elections than it had been in 2004. However, Asllanaj, a member of the LDK Presidency, its highest decision-making body, caustically denounced the party for doing nothing in the last two years that merited support from Kosovo's voters. The mayor said he expects a comfortable victory in Suhareka/Suva Reka -- probably in the second round of voting -- over his AAK opponent (reftel), but he took care to tell us that any LDK municipal victories would result from the efforts of local leaders, not the party's central leadership. Asllanaj specifically faulted senior LDK leaders for not analyzing the causes of the party's self-destruction in 2007 and for shirking responsibility for the loss. He also criticized Sejdiu for trying to run the party's day-to-day affairs despite the clear legal prohibition against him from doing so, remarking that "LDK cannot be run over the phone."

GJILAN: ON THE ATTACK AGAINST PDK

¶8. (SBU) LDK is looking at Gjilan/Gnjilane, an eastern Kosovo municipality it has traditionally led, as a top prospect for a pickup. Fatmir Rexhepi, mayoral candidate, LDK member of parliament, and prominent local businessman, met us recently in a large, well-maintained and fully staffed LDK branch office that would be the envy of most of Kosovo's national parties. Rexhepi is

running on a strong anti-corruption theme against the incumbent PDK mayor, Qemajl Mustafa. Rexhepi told us that he is using several high-profile infrastructure projects that should cost a fraction of their purported budgets to criticize the PDK municipal government for enriching itself at the municipality's expense. (Note: Persistent rumors of skimming from grossly inflated road projects have also dogged Prime Minister Thaci's PDK-run central government. Credible attacks on PDK municipal candidates for similar graft resonate well among a Kosovo electorate that is disaffected by growing corruption. End note) Rexhepi said incumbent mayor Mustafa, an associate of the Prime Minister who was imposed on a reluctant Gjilan/Gnjilane PDK branch in 2007, had also antagonized the local business community by contracting most of the town's new projects to outside companies. Rexhepi has produced a professional-looking, 18-page campaign brochure that details his platform to create jobs in Gjilan/Gnjilane over the next four years through investment, urban development, and infrastructure improvements. The local LDK branch has sent 20,000 copies of the brochure to every family in the municipality; in 2007 the national party only reissued its 2004 platform and never bothered to make it available to the public. Rexhepi said internal LDK polls -- a tool the party did not employ in 2007 -- show a significant increase in voter support for the party in Gjilan/Gnjilane, and told us that he expects an LDK victory there this year.

GJAKOVA: COMPETING IN AAK'S BACKYARD

19. (SBU) In Gjakova/Djakovica, the LDK is trying to retake one of its former municipalities in the heart of Ramush Haradinaj's (AAK) western Kosovo base. LDK mayoral candidate Fehmi Vula, a surgeon

PRISTINA 00000492 004.2 OF 004

from a prominent local family and former head of the Kosovo Red Cross, told us recently that his campaign is relying heavily on local media -- print, radio and television ads -- as well as door-to-door campaigning through the municipality and all 86 of its surrounding villages. Like Rexhepi, Vula is focusing on rule-of-law issues and job creation as the core of his campaign platform. And like most LDK officials we have spoken to, he also told us that his branch has "learned its lesson from 2007" and would have a large contingent of well-trained party election observers at polling stations to guard against the possibility of electoral fraud, a widely rumored though unproven phenomenon in the 2007 vote. Vula said he expected to be in a run-off in December against AAK Mayor Pal Lekaj, although recent internal LDK polling showed him tied for second against the joint AKR-LDD candidate Mimoza Kusari at 24 percent, with Lekaj leading the race at 34 percent.

COMMENT

110. (SBU) LDK, the center of morbid speculation about its imminent demise just six months ago, is showing new signs of life as a national party. Its devastating loss in 2007 stemmed from widespread disillusionment among traditional LDK voters with the party's infighting after Rugova's death and its complicity in the corruption and incompetence of the AAK-led government of 2004 to 2007 (reftel). The post-2007 marriage of convenience with the PDK did little to resolve these problems, with LDK often lost in the shadow of its much larger coalition partner and Sejdiu unable to take a public and leading role in party affairs. The collapse of LDK's electoral support in 2007 was so staggering -- a drop of almost 60 percent -- that even a modest improvement, perhaps wooing just 20 per cent of those disaffected voters, could be a game changer for LDK. And, although Mayor Asllanaj's criticism of the party's leadership for inactivity has some merit, it misses the mark in assessing LDK's improving political fortunes. By all accounts LDK is running a disciplined, well-organized campaign and is competing for votes as a professionally-run and competently organized political party. Better technical performance, alone, will not return LDK to its glory days at the center of Kosovo politics; the party also needs a leader who can represent the party in a way that President Sejdiu cannot. Isa Mustafa may fill that role, and it is ironic that as he leads the party's political resurgence amid scenes of seldom seen party unity, he may also be

setting the stage for a leadership clash that will pit him against
President Sejdiu.
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